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ABSTRACT

Self-handicapping strategies are behaviors or choices of performance settings which allow people to maintain self-esteem by avoiding negative self-relevant attributions. People will behave in such a way that accurate, nonambiguous attributions about their performance cannot be made. Research on self-handicapping has focused on clinically relevant behaviors such as drug choice, alcohol consumption, and test anxiety. A study was conducted to explore self-handicapping as a more general phenomenon. Task choice as a self-handicapping strategy was assessed under different conditions of attribute ambiguity. College students (N=43) were asked to sign up for one of two tests of social competence. One of the tests was described as an accurate measure, the other as a difficult and inaccurate test. Choice of the inaccurate test was believed to be a self-handicapping strategy, since it would allow subjects to avoid negative self-relevant information. For half the subjects (low ambiguity) the two tests were presented as being in the same format, while for the other half (high ambiguity) the tests were presented as being in different formats. The results showed that subjects in the high ambiguity condition self-handicapped more than subjects in the low ambiguity condition. Subjects in the high ambiguity condition could attribute their choice to format, rather than the less socially desirable motive of avoiding accurate information. (Author/NRB)

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SELF-HANDICAPPING BY TASK CHOICE: AN ATTRIBUTE AMBIGUITY ANALYSIS

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Self-Handicapping by Task Choice: An Attribute Ambiguity Analysis

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The present study assessed task choice as a self-handicapping strategy by manipulating attribute ambiguity. Forty-three subjects were asked to sign up for one of two tests of social competence. One of the tests was described as an accurate measure; the other as a difficult and inaccurate test. Choice of the inaccurate test was believed to be a self-handicapping strategy, since it allows subjects to avoid negative self-relevant information. For half the subjects (the low ambiguity condition) the two tests were presented as being in the same format, both either multiple choice or true-false. For the other half (the high ambiguity condition), the tests were presented as being in different formats, one multiple choice and the other true-false. As predicted, subjects in the high ambiguity condition self-handicapped more than subjects in the low ambiguity condition ($p < .03$). Subjects in the high ambiguity condition could attribute their choice to format, rather than the less socially desirable motive of avoiding accurate information.

Self-handicapping strategies are behaviors or choices of performance settings which allow people to maintain self-esteem by avoiding negative self-relevant attributions (Jones & Berglas, 1978). People will behave in such a way that accurate, nonambiguous attributions about their performance cannot be made. A popular example of self-handicapping is the student who stays up all night before an important exam. Poor performance on the test can be attributed to fatigue, rather than to the more central and esteem-threatening characteristic of ability.

Research in the self-handicapping literature has focused on clinically relevant behaviors (Snyder & Smith, 1982), such as drug choice (Berglas & Jones, 1978), alcohol consumption (Tucker, Vuchinich, & Sobell, 1981), and test anxiety (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Paisley, 1984; Smith, Snyder, & Handelsman, 1982). In each of these studies, subjects were exposed to a

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procedure designed to increase threat: a difficult task followed by noncontingent success feedback. Subjects then had the option of choosing a debilitating behavior before working on another difficult task. Subjects who chose the debilitating option were said to be self-handicapping. In each study, the self-handicapping strategy was a "pathological" behavior.

The purpose of the present study was to explore self-handicapping as a more general phenomenon. That is, self-handicapping may be used by people under ordinary circumstances, through ordinary means. While it may be true that some people are driven to self-destructive behaviors such as alcohol consumption by increased threat, many others experience small threats every day, and may use choice of performance setting or other ordinary behaviors to avoid negative self-relevant attributions. For example, given the choice between chess opponents of comparable or greater ability, people can avoid negative attributions concerning chess ability by asking the stronger opponent for a game. A loss can then be attributed to the strength of the opponent, rather than personal weakness.

The present study offered subjects a similar choice of tasks. Subjects were asked to sign up for one of two tests of social competence. One was described as an accurate measure; the other as very difficult and inaccurate. Subjects wanting to self-handicap could choose the very difficult test and thus avoid unambiguous information about their performance.

In addition, the study investigated one parameter which should affect self-handicapping: level of situational attribute ambiguity (Snyder & Wicklund, 1981). Attribute ambiguity exists in a situation when there are multiple plausible explanations for a person's behavior. It is believed that individuals are more likely to engage in socially undesirable behavior under conditions of attribute ambiguity because their behavior is less likely to be

ascribed to negative internal causes. For example, a driver may be more likely to run a red light under hazardous than good conditions since the behavior could be attributed to poor road conditions and not poor driving ability.

Self-handicapping is very often not a socially desirable response. Staying up all night before an important exam can be an effective self-handicapping strategy, but if the student is only taking one class, his or her motivation (and reasoning) for engaging in the behavior may be questioned. If situational attribute ambiguity exists because the student is taking a full load of courses and working full-time, no one (including the student) will think that the "all-nighter" was unnecessary and simply an attempt to avoid negative self-relevant attributions. Thus, it was predicted that subjects would be more likely to self-handicap via task choice under conditions of high attribute ambiguity than under conditions of low attribute ambiguity.

To measure task choice as a self-handicapping strategy under different conditions of attribute ambiguity, we utilized a method designed by Snyder, Kleck, Strenta, & Mentzer (1979) to detect objectionable motives. Snyder et al. reasoned that people ordinarily try to conceal motives that are not socially desirable and only exhibit such motives when there was attribute ambiguity in the situation. In their study, subjects were asked to choose between two movies in two rooms, one of which required subjects to sit next to a person in a wheel chair. In one condition, subjects could choose between two different movies. In the other condition, both movies were the same. When there was a choice of movie, more people avoided sitting next to the handicapped confederate than when there was no choice. In the former condition, subjects could display avoidance behavior because of the alternative attribution of the movie. By varying the attribute ambiguity in the situa-

tion, Snyder et al. (1979) were able to detect the avoidance motive without recourse to self-report measure, which are subject to similar distortions due to self-presentation motives.

The present study varied attribute ambiguity in a similar way by presenting some subjects a choice of task format along with a choice of task (high attribute ambiguity). Other subjects had no such choice of task format (low attribute ambiguity).

To summarize, in this study we attempted to expand the domain of self-handicapping behavior to nonpathological behavior such as task choice. Given a choice of two tests of social competence, one being accurate and the other difficult and inaccurate, subjects choosing to self-handicap would select the difficult, inaccurate task. We also examined whether the degree of self-handicapping varied as a function of the level of attribute ambiguity in the situation. Thus, we predicted that more subjects would choose the inaccurate test (a self-handicapping behavior) when also given a choice of test format (high ambiguity) than when given no choice of format (low ambiguity).

Method

Forty-three students (11 males, 32 females) in a junior-level psychology course at the University of Colorado at Denver participated in the study. The experimenter, another professor at the University, came into the class purportedly to recruit subjects for a normative study he was conducting on two tests of social competence. Subjects were told they would have a chance to take one of the tests.

After explaining the importance of social competence, the experimenter told subjects about the "Test of Social Competence" (TSC) and the "Social Presence Survey" (SPS). Subjects were told that the SPS, based on "early normative data," was a very accurate test, yielding a wide range of scores.

They were told that the TSC yielded artificially low scores, and that the test was not accurate.

Subjects were then told that each test came in two formats: multiple choice and true false. It was explained that format did not seem to influence test results, but because it was recognized that students may have a preference, some students would have a choice of format in addition to a choice of test. It was further explained that, since copies of the tests were limited, not all students would have that choice. Subjects in the low ambiguity condition were then given a form which asked them to choose which test they wanted to take; both tests were in the same format. Students in the high ambiguity condition were given forms which showed that one test was multiple choice while the other was true-false. The order of tests, and the formats of the particular tests, were counterbalanced. After choosing their preferred test (the TSC or SPS) subjects were asked to answer the following three questions on a seven-point scale: a) How important is it for you to do well at this test? b) To what extent do you believe the test you take will be a good indicator of your social competence? c) How much effort do you plan to expend on this test? Students were also asked an open-ended question regarding their reasons for choosing the test they did.

After choosing one of the two tests and filling out the questionnaire, subjects were thoroughly debriefed.

Results

Preliminary analyses showed no significant effects on any dependent variable for subject sex or pairing of format with test. Subsequent analyses are presented for male and female subjects combined.

A chi-square analysis showed that there was a significant difference in the percentage of people who chose each test between the low and high ambi-

guity conditions, $\underline{X}^2(1, \underline{N} = 43) = 4.72$, $\underline{p} < .03$. In the low ambiguity condition, 3 subjects (14.3%) chose the very difficult test, while 18 (85.7%) chose the moderately difficult test. In the high ambiguity condition, 11 subjects (50%) chose the difficult test, and 11 chose the moderately difficult test.

Analyses of the three self-report measures yielded no significant differences. For the first question, asking subjects to rate the importance of doing well on the test, the means for the high and low ambiguity conditions were 4.73 ($\underline{SD} = 0.70$) and 4.90 ($\underline{SD} = 1.04$) respectively, $\underline{t}(41) = 0.66$, $\underline{ns}$. The second question asked subjects to rate the effectiveness of the test they'd chosen as an indicator of social competence. Means for the high and low ambiguity conditions were 4.14 ($\underline{SD} = 0.73$) and 3.90 ($\underline{SD} = 1.04$) respectively, $\underline{t}(40) = -0.86$, $\underline{ns}$. The third question asked subjects how much effort they planned to expend on the test. Means for the high and low ambiguity conditions were 5.09 ($\underline{SD} = 1.06$) and 5.14 ($\underline{SD} = 0.73$) respectively, $\underline{t}(41) = 0.19$, $\underline{ns}$.

Discussion

The hypothesis of the present study was confirmed: self-handicapping choices were made more often when attribute ambiguity was high than when it was low. When subjects could attribute their choice of test to a preference for format, they were more likely to choose the test which "happened" to allow them the opportunity to avoid potentially negative self-relevant information. When there were no alternative explanations for such a choice, subject did not self-handicap.

The present study found no differences between conditions on self-report measures. The beauty of Snyder et al.'s (1979) paradigm, however, is that we need not rely on such self-report measures.The attribute ambiguity analysis appears to be a more sensitive measure of self-handicapping than self-report.

The present study found evidence for the use of self-handicapping strategies which are not potentially pathological, and which occur in the absence of an extreme threat. While it may be true that rigid and pervasive use of some self-handicapping strategies may lead to alcoholism, chronic underachievement (Jones & Berglas, 1978), drug use, and other debilitating conditions, it may be useful to explore self-handicapping strategies which are more subtle in their execution and effects. These more ordinary strategies may not lead to overt pathology, but to a relatively small decrease in performance. For example, the education of a college student who chooses easy courses, while attributing his choice to actual interest in weaving baskets or scuba diving, may suffer.

While we have suggested that choosing a very difficult and inaccurate test is a self-handicapping strategy, there may be other possible reasons why subjects may elect to do so. For example, subjects with a high need for achievement may be more likely to choose a difficult test for the challenge. However, there is no theoretically compelling reason why such subjects should be more likely to do so only under conditions of high attribute ambiguity. Moreover, the choice of the very difficult test also meant the receipt of inaccurate feedback. Persons high in need for achievement typically desire accurate feedback (Litwin & Stringer, 1968) and prefer tasks of intermediate difficulty because these tasks maximize self-relevant feedback about their abilities (Buckert, Meyer, & Schmalt, 1979).

The theory of self-handicapping does explain why subjects would act to avoid feedback under certain conditions (high attribute ambiguity). The present experimental paradigm was useful for exposing self-handicapping behavior and for showing that self-handicapping is a behavioral response and not simply a self-limiting attitude. Presumably, the paradigm would be useful for

investigating other situational parameters which have been linked to self-handicapping, such as the personal relevance of the evaluated dimension, degree of situational threat, or whether the evaluated behavior is performed publicly or privately. Continued success at finding higher rates of avoidance behavior under theoretically meaningful conditions would add support for the notion that this choice is indicative of a self-handicapping strategy.

We concur with Snyder, et al. (1979) who encourage the exploration of "ordinary" self-handicapping strategies such as such as task choice or procrastination. The strategy of manipulating attribute ambiguity appears to be a useful way to accomplish this.

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